DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 154 CS 207 302

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TITLE Internal Revision: Case Studies of First Year College Writers.
PUB DATE Nov 82
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (72nd, Washington, DC, November 19-24, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *College Freshmen; Higher Education; *Models; Prewriting; *Revision (Written Composition); Sequential Approach; Student Attitudes; *Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Response; Theories; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Invention (Rhetorical)

ABSTRACT

Case studies of six college freshmen enrolled in freshman composition courses that used sequenced assignments addressed to the same topic all term were used to investigate how students define revision, how their teachers define it, and what is important about the differences in these definitions. The students possessed a common theory of revision that was thoughtful, consistent, and systematic. It was derived from imagining their readers' process of interpreting what they had written. Viewing prewriting as the primary source of invention, they tended to see revision "externally," to restrict it according to criteria already present in the first draft. Unlike these students, experienced writers--including the teachers in the study--saw revision in a second, "internal" way, as a part of the process of rhetorical invention. Lacking sufficient flexibility, the students had trouble adapting themselves to the teachers' stress on revision as discovery. They tended to misunderstand directions and comments from their teachers intended to suggest internal revision. These results indicated that what the students already knew was blocking what they needed to learn. Their paradigm prevented their teachers' meaning from reaching them. Teachers must recognize the often unpredictable effects of such conflicts, as must composition researchers. (JL)

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INTERNAL REVISION: CASE STUDIES OF FIRST YEAR COLLEGE WRITERS

Susan V. Wall

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INTERNAL REVISION: CASE STUDIES OF FIRST YEAR COLLEGE WRITERS

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This paper is based on a set of case studies which I recently completed at the University of Pittsburgh. The purpose of the research was to study revision in the rhetorical context of freshman composition instruction. I followed six students through their first semester at Pitt, talking with them for about ten hours over the course of the fourteen week term and having access to all their work and to interviews with their teachers. The courses in which they were enrolled were all designed as spiral curricula using sequenced assignments addressed to the same topic all term. The pedagogy was one that Ken Dowst has called the "epistemic approach," one in which assignments typically refer back to earlier assignments and invite students to re-see what they have said before.[1] Revision as invention, in other words, was an essential part of what was being taught.

The four students I'll be talking about today were all white, middle class, and came from Pittsburgh or its surrounding areas. Two, John and Jean (all these names are fictitious), had been placed in basic writing courses, John at level one and Jean at level two. Dianne and Maggie had been evaluated as "average" in ability, and both had elected

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[1] Kenneth Dowst, "The Epistemic Approach: Writing, Knowing, and Learning," in Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, ed. Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1980), pp. 65-85.

to take a course in critical writing.

What I want to focus on today is the theories of revision involved in these case studies: how these students defined revision, how their teachers defined it, and why we might want to concern ourselves with the differences between the two.

In contrast to the freshmen whom Nancy Sommers studied, these student writers were not what I would call "atheoretical" in their approach to revision.[2] Although they themselves felt that their previous education had not taught them much about revising or encouraged revision of their work, their remarks in our early interviews indicated that they had developed a sense of the usefulness of revision that defined it as more than making minor lexical changes or error corrections. Although both their sophistication and writing performance varied, their common theory of revision was thoughtful, consistent, and systematic. They had what Sommers calls "an internalized sense of what constitutes good writing."

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[2] Nancy Sommers, "Revision in the Composing Process: A Case Study of College Freshmen and Adult Writers," Diss. Boston University 1978, pp. 153-158.

Their theory of "revision" was derived from imagining their reader's process of interpreting what they had written. It was (to borrow Linda Flower's useful term) a reader-based theory, whose chief end and principle was the clear and effective communication of ideas to an audience. In our early interviews, these students expressed a dynamic sense of how a reader had to go from point to point in an essay, and their comments indicated that as they revised they seemed to be trying to imagine that reader's experience.

These writers all spoke repeatedly of their efforts to make papers "flow," a metaphor for a sense that an essay's meaning unfolded steadily upon rereading, without confusion. "I know right there," Jean said, "if I have to go back and reread the sentence, that something has to be done with it, because the reader's not going to understand it either." This concern for clarity justified the revisions they made in the paragraphs of their papers. An introduction had to be worked on until (rather like Kenneth Burke's notion of form as "arousing" expectations) the reader was encouraged to read on. As Jean put it, "From reading [the introduction] you get the feel the writer's going to lead you in." A conclusion was a chance to make sure the important points had been understood. This meant, in turn, that paragraphs in the body of the essay had to be arranged

and clarified and examples elaborated so that the reader would be able to see that the conclusions made sense.

In the hands of more skilled writers like Dianne and Maggie, various aspects of the theory were more sophisticated and subtle than they were for the two basic writing students. John and Jean, for example, thought that revising was important in order to have a paper that would not bore the reader. Dianne and Maggie agreed, but they would talk of being "original" and "persuasive," not just "interesting." To make a paper "flow" for the reader, John concentrated on blocking out the paragraphs of an essay so that they kept to one topic, Jean worked on paragraph to paragraph "fluidity" and "logic," and Dianne and Maggie worried as well about sentence-to-sentence connections and overall coherence. But these writers all expressed what I would call a very adult desire that their ideas should be understood. They spoke most disparagingly not of former teachers who had been challenging or tough, but of those who had not cared about or believed what they had written.

In Donald Murray's terms, then, these students had an understanding of the function of revision that was

"external" rather than "internal."[3] Their primary source of invention was prewriting; and while this did not make them unaware of or indifferent to the discovery of new subordinate ideas or examples during composing, they used the set of ideas they had begun with as criteria which limited the scope of what would be changed during drafting, a way of screening out new superordinate ideas or anomalous information which might seriously challenge what tney intended to say and prompt any major reformulation of their approach to the paper. Then once a first draft had been completed, it became in turn the basis for criteria governing further revising. Assuming that their main ideas would be in place by the point that this draft reached closure, these writers engaged in further revising only when they felt it was needed in order to improve how the paper "sounded," that is, how it made sense to the imagined reader.

The distinction, then, that I would make between the adult writers studied by Sommers and other researchers such as Mimi Schwartz, Linda Flower and John Hayes and the

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[3] Donald Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery," in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), pp. 85-103.

subjects of this study is not one between writers who are theoretical in their understanding of revision and others who are not, but one between writers who understand revision to have two different functions and writers who know only one. Experienced writers, that is, understand revision in the same way these students did at first, as a way to prepare a written product to meet the needs of the reader. But in contrast to these students, many experienced writers-- including the teachers in this study-- also understand revision in a second way, as a part of the process of rhetorical invention. The function of this second kind of revision is writer-based: to help them discover what they can know and say.

To be sure, the two revision functions can blur, overlap, and alternate in the composing process. A writer may invent new approaches to a topic in the process of imagining what will persuade the reader, or find that what at first just looked liked an example that needed further clarification is really something she doesn't understand, a sign that some more work on invention needs to be done. Conversely, anything written in an exploratory draft or as the result of reformulation will still have to be reconsidered from an "external" perspective if the intended reader is someone other than the writer.

But there are important reasons, research and experience suggest, for writers to know about both functions of revision even when they choose typically or in a particular situation to concentrate on just one. One reason is that because writing turns language into an object which may be retrieved and manipulated, exploratory drafting and heuristic revising have distict advantages over thinking or talking as bases for invention. A second reason for internal revision is that writers cannot always predict the difficulty and confusion they will encounter as they write. If they are unable then to waive their concerns for the clarity and unity of the final written product and concentrate on working through their problems, their only options are to give up, either by reducing the challenge of what they are attempting or by trying something else entirely.

These students, however, lacked the flexibility mature writers have for working with provisional drafts and subsequent revisions and for coping with problems that arise in their attempts to do so. What they could do with a draft of a paper might be described as a process limited at both ends, that is, circumscribed by what they thought they had to invent before drafting and by what they thought they should do once that draft was complete. They saw revision as an important way to communicate what they had to say, but

not as a way to discover it.

Because of the assumptions these students brought with them to college, serious problems arose when they encountered teaching directed to an unfamiliar way of understanding revision, one which stressed discovery and the re-seeing of ideas. This unfamiliar approach at first confused, puzzled, and even angered them; their existing frameworks for comprehending the language of writing instruction did not prepare them for understanding what it was they were being asked to do. Their knowledge got in the way of their learning something new.

They were baffled, for example, by assignments which asked them to engage in what has been called "heuristic" revision, that is, using a paper or draft as a basis for something more to say about a subject. When John, for example, was asked to revise his early papers by adding other examples and a lot more information he saw this request as arbitrary, a requirement, as he put it, to "pad" his papers with "details" which he felt would just be "boring" to his reader. It took him over a month of such assignments before he realized that extensive redrafting could be part of a process of invention, that it might "take a lot of words" to get to what he wanted to say but that the effort was worth it because, as he put it, "you might learn

something."

Teachers' initial statements intended to encourage revision and offer help with drafts met at first with similarly uncomprehending responses. Two teachers in the study, for example, specifically stated in their course descriptions that papers could be revised extensively, as many times as a student wanted, and that they would be available for conferences to discuss problems with the course. When I asked Jean, however, if papers could be revised once they were submitted and returned, she said that she was not sure if that was allowed. When I asked Dianne and Jean whether they had considered talking to their teachers about the problems they were having with confusion and ambiguity in their drafts, their initial reactions were to seem surprised at the question.

In general, written comments on papers which were intended to suggest internal revision were not seen that way. Statements such as, "probe the issues further," or, "can you say more about this?" were interpreted as judgments of the final product and perhaps as advice to try harder next time. Or if these writers did consider revision, their teachers' comments were seen in the same light as these students saw their own drafts; these comments were understood, that is, as treating the ideas of the paper

as established rather than as alterable or preliminary. Revision might mean adding examples for support or clarifying or reorganizing what was already there. But it was not a way of asking, "What other evidence might support a different conclusion? In what other ways can this evidence be interpreted? What else can this paper be made to mean?"

Even assignments which asked directly for paper revisions were subject to difficulties of interpretation when they were couched in terms that did not match the students' definition of revision. When Jean, for example, was given a revision assignment which asked for a "smarter," more "insightful" essay, perhaps even one representing "a change of mind," she interpreted it to mean that she should take what she had written and "back it up" more, "give the reader background" so that the paper would be more "readable." An even more intriguing response was Maggie's reaction to an assignment which asked her to "revise (i.e., re-vision, re-see)" a paper she had written in order to "find something to say" that would be more "insightful," that would create a "smarter paper, not necessarily a more elegant or correct one." When I asked Maggie what she thought she was being asked to do, she said:

> I guess I just figured that you took your paper and you took what was wrong with it, and what you learned since from when you wrote it, like going over it in class, then you just try to make it a better paper. I always think of it as more

> technical, even though I did have a lot more ideas. "Technical"'s like the way the words go, sentence structure, the way you can put them together so that they sound better. Usually you have your ideas, and you just want it to flow smoothly.

What I find fascinating here is the transitional language. Is revising valuable only to convey more "smoothly" the ideas one already has, or is it something that happens because the writer has learned something, discovered "a lot more ideas?" Maggie is on her way, I think, from one language about revision to another, but she's not there yet. Her remarks confuse the two functions of revisions rather than distinguish between them. She almost arrives at the point where she can connect revising with invention, but then the old reader-centered theory asserts itself and she ends only with revision as a demonstration of what is "technical," by which I think she means "technique" in its root sense, a demonstration of the writer's skill in creating a well-made artifact.

What, then, are the implications of this study?

In a recent article in College Composition and Communication entitled "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," Maxine Hairston discusses what she sees as the breakdown of that "common body of beliefs and assumptions" that has been called the

"current traditional paradigm."[4] Richard Young has noted that some of the dominant features of that approach to teaching writing are an emphasis upon "the formal properties of the written text" and a general disregard for the process of invention.[5] Hairston elaborates further Young's second point, observing how traditionally trained students believe that they must "know what they are going to say before they write," an assumption which effectively relegates revision to a final stage of composing and divorces it from the process of invention. Although, she goes on to argue, we may be in the middle of a "paradigm shift" in the field, temporary or ad hoc measures will not provide effective resolutions to the problems inherent in the system itself.

My conclusions today are much the same. The students in this study had difficulty re-seeing revision because of the coherence and consistency of their own language for understanding the process, language typical, I think, of the current traditional approach. Their definitions of revision

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[4] Maxine Hairston, "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing" CCC, 33 (February 1982), 76-98.

[5] Richard Young, "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention," in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), pp. 29-47.

formed frameworks for interpreting the language of writing instruction as powerful as the "frames" or "schemata" which, as reading researchers and theorists argue, govern a reader's comprehension of a written text. "What we know and can know," as Tony Petrosky says, "is dependent on what we already know and believe."[6]

For this reason, then, we need to see the process of learning as transformational rather than incremental. In these cases, that is, learning a new definition of revision was not a matter of adding information on to what students already knew, new facts onto an existing data base. On the contrary, what these writers already knew about revision blocked a new kind of understanding. When teachers spoke to them about revision as "re-seeing," they either did not seem to comprehend what was being said at all, or they translated this writer-centered language into reader-centered meanings. It was a process which reveals, I think, the power of the paradigms by which they had been taught. "A way of seeing," as Burke observes, "is also a way of not seeing."[7]

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[6] Anthony R. Petrosky, "From Story to Essay: Reading and Writing," CCC, 33 (February 1982), p. 23.

[7] Burke, Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose (New York: New Republic, Inc., 1936), p. 70.

Learning a new approach to revision, then means that students must experience what Bill Coles calls an "alternation in mind" which "can be seen as a change in language, a shift in terminology or definition, the replacement of one vocabulary (or syntax) by another."[8] "Replacement," I think, is the key term here. These case studies suggest that significant changes in what students know about revision are unlikely to happen piecemeal or through partial or ad hoc efforts when the "languages" by which they define revision are systematic and well established. Learning of this sort takes time, and is unpredictable. All four of the students I've mentioned were able by the end of the term to talk about revision in ways that convinced me that they could connect it with invention. But one, Maggie, was unwilling actually to take the risks that re-seeing her drafts would involve. And for John, Jean, and Dianne, it was six to eight weeks into the term before any significant internal revisions appeared in their drafts.

The systematic nature of a paradigm also accounts, I think, for much of the confusion and frustration I saw

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[8] William E.Coles, Jr., Teaching Composing: A Guide to Teaching Writing as a Self-Creating Process (New Rochelle, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1974), p. 26.

involved in the learning process. Concepts, as Vygotsky observed, do not lie in the mind like "peas in a bag."[9] They are organized, primarily by language, into structures which select and compose what is known. Learning to think of revision as invention meant, for these students, an undoing, a deconstruction, of the languages which ordered what they already knew, since to move from defining one function for revision to defining two is to move, as Burke might put it, from positive to dialectical terms, a different set of relationships. "Internal revision" and "external revision," that is, are the sort of terms which "require an opposite to define them."[10] Good writers, I think, know how to acknowledge and dwell within the tension between these opposites, recognizing that the curiosity which spins out a further line of argument may work against the desire to support and further confirm what has already been said, or that the rewards of discovering more to say may come at the expense of the need for achieving closure. Student writers, however, may be unprepared for these tensions, and teachers' efforts to get them to re-see their assumptions and change

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9 Lev S. Vygotsky, Thought and Language, trans. E. Hanfmann and G. Vakar (Cambridge: M. I. T. Press, 1962), p. 110.

10 Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action, 3rd. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 109n.

their approaches may well be met by responses of confusion, frustration, or, as in Maggie's case, an unwillingness to undo old ways and take the risks that discovery writing involves.

Finally, I think what I've been saying here about teaching applies to research as well. If we seek to study how traditionally trained students learn something other than the current traditional approach to composing, then we need to think in terms of longer studies than most of the ones that have been done so far-- not a few assignments or a few weeks, but months, perhaps even semesters or years of consistent work. And we need to be prepared for ambivalent responses from subjects, uneven results, and the need for long-term measures of change.

This paper was presented at the annual conference of the National Council of Teachers of English, Washington, D. C, November 20, 1982.